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#### **Title**

The Queer Confessional: Locating the Discordant Energies of Language and Queer Form in Henri Cole's Poetics

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## **Abstract**

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## INTRODUCTION

“all I am is impulse and longing / Pulled forward by the rope of your arm” – Henri Cole, *Blur*

In an interview for *The Paris Review* conducted by Sasha Weiss, poet Henri Cole remarks “Pleasure comes from the art-making impulse, from assembling language into art.” This ‘art-making impulse’ is a facet of Cole’s modus operandi as a queer poet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one in which the assemblage of language is both a form of sexual pleasure and the manifestation of the poetics of process. His work exists in a temporal boundary in which he is inspired by and yet temporally ‘succeeds’ the American modern and postmodern poetic landscape. To attempt to try and stratify Cole’s temporal period is an exercise in straying away from precisely what makes his poetic mission queer. His queerness is girded by ever-consistent contradictions in his verse.

Turning to another interview conducted by Christopher Hennessy, Cole remarks on his upbringing in a military household in which he felt an inadequacy through the condition of contradiction, in which he states “I think this, in part, is why self-love and self-hate co-exist in my poems, as they did in my life.” The deeply personal nature of his verse belies a confessional mode of poetics at play, but Cole is not necessarily interested in the traditional sense of the confessional. With the co-existence of ‘self-love’ and ‘self-hate,’ there is a latent queerness of the acceptance of the dual love and hate of the self; which is an acceptance of contradictions and in-betweenness. The existence of contradictions is itself almost a pleasure, as it is in the articulation of that co-existence of love and hate is where poetic and life difficulty finds its catharsis in the recursive articulation of language assembly.

The initial focus on foregrounding of Cole’s placing in the American poetic tradition as well as one mere facet of his poetic mission serves to foreground the larger goal of this paper. This paper, through an analysis of Cole’s poetry, charts the existence of a new kind of

confessional poetics that resists the notion of what Miranda Sherwin identifies as “associated with private, self-revelatory impulses that are insufficiently and transparently transformed into art” (15). While these ‘private, self-revelatory impulses’ do play a key part in undergirding how confessional poetry is perceived in the larger American literary canon, to reduce confessional poetics to a solely self-centered mode of satisfying the poetic impulse is to leave uncovered the political and queer possibilities of a confessional mode of poetics. Thus, I argue for an existence of a queer confessional mode of poetics through a close analysis of Cole’s verse, which manifests as an acceptance of contradictions and an existence of in-betweenness. An autobiographical reading may still play a paramount part in discourses of the verity of the events, but what is key to a queer confessional mode is not necessarily a clear truth, but a ‘truth’ that exists in constant conflict with itself and doubts its own existence (via contradiction). The acceptance of an unstable truth from unstable life is in turn, an acceptance of both ‘self-love’ and ‘self-hate,’ a queer configuration that is articulated by a confessional mode.

To begin to identify how the queer confessional manifests in Cole’s poetics is to first articulate the Apollonian-Dionysian literary dynamic through the ‘framed disorder’ of Cole’s verse. “Apollo,” The conclusory poem of *The Visible Man*, published in 1998, is exemplary of the framework of the ‘framed disorder’ that I am proposing. Defining a framed disorder is to build a careful framework of lyric verse, an Apollonian impulse, and actively subverting the Apollonian frame through the chaotic tendencies of the Dionysian. Divided in sequences of 14, the second ‘part’ of Apollo is what exemplifies Cole’s poetic framework of a dual ‘order’ and ‘chaos’ in his verse:

Stay married, god said. One marriage.

Don’t abortion. Ugly mortal sin.

Beautiful Gorgeous Mary loves you  
so much. Heaven tremendous thrill  
of ecstasy forever. What you are,  
they once was, God said, the beloved ones  
before you... (1-7)

Cole's verse is 'Apollonian' through the terseness of its construction. Performing a line-by-line reading, the sentences in the verse are almost fragmented and are consistently so through the verse. The Apollonian order is inscribed through the pattern of terseness that is maintained in the first two lines. As one moves further forward, elements of the Dionysian 'disorder' begin to manifest through the lengthening of each sentence. The brevity of God's entreating away from sin 'expands' in length at the invocation of Mary. However, if the order of length is disrupted, the language seems to remain Apollonian in length and construction. Yet, the growth of each line is gradual, remaining compact. The almost unyielding pattern belies a Dionysian impulse. "Heaven tremendous thrill of ecstasy forever" is one such illusory line that appears to be a carefully constructed in an Apollonian fashion. Its Dionysian pulses are embedded in its 'tremendous thrill of ecstasy,' invoking the image of Dionysian chaos that is formed through an Apollonian assemblage.

The Apollonian-Dionysian framework is crucial to not only articulating the queer confessional framework, but is critical in identifying Cole's expression and configuration of queerness. Langdon Hammer makes a salient observation about the dual existence of the Apollonian and Dionysian dynamic by writing of his ambition as a "desire to combine in his work the qualities of formal balance and open-ended, anarchic exploration that have longed defined opposing or even warring principles in American poetry." Elucidating our introductory

analysis of “Apollo,” the ‘formal balance’ that Hammer invokes is Cole’s strategy of utilizing patterns to keep the verse tightly knit to make it appear as solely Apollonian. However, the Dionysian is not necessarily at war with the Apollonian. Instead, Cole accepts the contradiction of a ‘framed disorder,’ utilizing the Apollonian and Dionysian in tandem. In the 10<sup>th</sup> sequence of Apollo, Cole is cogent in the realization of language’s assembly, in which he writes “Yet, subject is / only pretext for assembling the words / whose real story is process is flow” (3-5). The Apollonian is necessary as laying the groundwork, the ‘subject,’ of the language play. However, the Dionysian “free-for-all sensuality” (Hammer) is what creates the ‘process’ of the ‘real story.’ Both are intimately connected with one another in Cole’s poetic process and thus, a binary analysis proves unproductive especially in a queer context. Even the very language of the quoted passage belies a poetics of process, in which Apollo is taken as the first step of the “pretext” that finds its rough ‘conclusion’ in flow. However, the Dionysian is by no means a fixed conclusion in the poetics of process. I turn back to Hammer as notes the usage of the Apollonian-Dionysian framework in verse, as he states, “We can see Cole’s Apollonian Dionysian impulses, ‘mixed up’ like those two counterpointed voices.” The mixing of what seems be two ends of a binary is instead, the flowing of contradictions into one another. Thus, it is through the identification of these Apollonian-Dionysian contradictions is where we begin to unpack the particular queerness of Cole’s verse.

After we unpack the Apollonian-Dionysian dynamic in Cole’s verse, we then turn to unpacking the implications of confessional poetics’ legacy as a juncture in Henri Cole’s expression of queerness. Of course, Cole remarks somewhat negatively on the notion of his poetry being classified in the confessional vein, “When I am writing, there is no pleasure in revealing the facts of my life. Pleasure comes from the art-making impulse, from assembling

language into art.” It would be unproductive to impose the label of the confessional onto Cole, as the artist’s perspective acknowledges, but Cole does not classify himself as such. However, what I propose is not necessarily imposing the confessional genre as we know it towards Cole’s verse. As this paper proposes a new model of looking towards confessional poetics via the queer confessional, the possibility of re-imagining the confessional as the space of the intersection between the private space and the political ramifications as it at the heart of the intersection between the confessional and queer implications. The thematics of a private, family life, particularly with a focus on the mother figure, that is ever-present in confessional poetics appear in Cole’s verse. A salient example would be “Mechanical Soft” from Cole’s *Touch*:

...Mother is dying,  
you see, and proximity to this death makes me  
nostalgic for the French language. I am not  
a typical son, I suppose, valuing happiness,  
even while spooning mechanically soft pears—  
like light vanishing—into the body whose tissue  
once dissolved to create breast milk for me (8-14)

The intensely personal nature of “Mechanical Soft” is indeed almost confessional-like in the traditional sense of the term. The speaker engages with the mother’s active death and expresses the intensely personal complications of the emotional turmoil of the mother’s death. The chief focus on the mother figure is another marker in which Cole is at least familiar with the tropic conventions of the confessional poet. It must also be acknowledged that just as Cole utilizes its tropes, he engages in its subversions as well. In contrast to a confessional poem’s clear, photo-like language to its verse, Cole’s confessional verse is Apollonian in language and sparse in

detail. I argue that this terseness is perhaps cogently modernist in function. The language is fantastical and surreal, the ‘mechanically soft pears’ rendering a much more unstable image in which ‘spooning’ these fantasy fruits is rooted in the pleasure of language assembly amid the mourning of the mother’s death.

I then turn towards Peter Nickowitz’s *Rhetoric and Sexuality* in further tracing the legacy of confessional poetics towards Cole’s work. Nickowitz’s research delves into a deep analysis of Cole’s chief poetic inspirations, in which Elizabeth Bishop configures as my introductory junction point through her relationship of confessional poetics as Nickowitz writes that she “distrusted the confessional movement.” Despite such a relationship, two prongs “betrays a certain tolerance for it,” namely her relationship to Robert Lowell and her reliance upon ‘truth.’ This distrust finds an arguable continuation in Cole’s self-perception in his *Paris Review* interview. Cole makes a similar gesture, as the interviewer remarks “You’ve said you see yourself not as a confessional poet, but as an autobiographical poet.”

However, it is important to note that the term ‘confessional’ is often in constant flux due to the history of literary criticism that has often derided the term. Thus, to negotiate such criticisms, this paper will turn towards analyzing the nature of “truth” and myth-making as constellatory points in which the term ‘confessional’ moves away from the impulses of an absolute truth and more into the radical function of de-stabilizing the notion of what a ‘truth’ is. Through exploring Bishop’s relationship with the truth, which Nickowitz writes as a “reliance on ‘truthfulness’ functions as one way that the poet asserts a perspective,” I argue that Bishop’s ‘truth’ is not absolute insofar that it is not required for the truth to be rooted to an absolute truth. Instead, I motion for a ‘truth’ that is unstable in poetic verse. The documentation which results in Cole’s identification as an autobiographical poet is indeed from a deeply personal root. There is

an element that is ‘confessed,’ and thus, there is an element and reliance of the truth. Yet, the truth itself is unstable. It is in this instability in which the confessional can exist as a radical and queer space. Thus, this de-stabilization of an absolute truth is the ‘retrieval’ of the confessional mode.

After forays into the Apollonian-Dionysian and Confessional frameworks, this paper will then turn towards the queerness of Cole’s verse to articulate the concept of a ‘queer confessional’ in practice. To focus on the queerness of Cole’s verse is to acknowledge Cole’s struggles as a gay poet and additionally, tracing the queerness of his humor, playful language, and contradictions in his verse. Thus, Cole’s mission of destabilizing poetic verse is an integral part of ‘defining’ and visualizing his queerness. I turn towards Cole’s earlier collections, a poem from *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* titled “The Best Man,” as a brief example:

...Hosannas rise from the sutra  
of plane din, from the pressurized  
chamber’s vibrant Ommmmmmm  
of penetrating high-altitudinal space.  
Godspeed, brother and sister. Swim with the armor  
of arctic fish... (53-58)

Cole’s humor manifests through the Dionysian impulses that are evident even in his earlier verse. These impulses are present through the surreal but precise language assembly that Cole undertakes. ‘Hosannas’ that rise are sounds that look to physically ‘rise’ from a source, but it is the set up to the ‘vibrant Ommmmmmm’ that is the line that acts as the marker of humor in this verse. However, the queer dimension of this verse is the language of ‘penetration,’ in which this is an early example of Cole’s perchance of utilizing sexual humor to express queer and sexual

pleasure. The ‘penetrating’ of ‘space’ is followed with a further image that seems impossible and peculiar, the swimming of ‘brother and sister...with the arctic fish.’ Thus, Cole’s queer humor lies within the seeming ‘strangeness’ of language, in which the very assemblage of putting words that don’t seem to fit is the feeling of the ‘Ommmmmmmm’ that penetrates. The troubling of language is humorous, but so are its affects on its verse. These troublings of language and their ensuing plays create queer possibilities of meaning and truth.

While I briefly explored the humor in Cole’s verse which displays his queer affects, I motion towards also acknowledging the ostracization of being a homosexual poet that affected Cole and the poets from which he is inspired by. For a salient example, Hart Crane figures as one of Cole’s inspirations in which Crane is the articulation of difficulty in a homosexual/queer existence. Robert K. Martin identifies Crane’s dilemma and difficulty, the “dilemma was double, since from him the plight of the homosexual in a heterosexual society and the plight of the artist in a materialistic were conjoined” (117). Martin then motions towards a solution with two prongs, in which sexual and political anxiety must be resolved to begin to negotiate a queer existence. I then motion that the nature of Cole’s inspiration of Crane isn’t to necessarily offer a solution, but is instead the acknowledgement of poetic difficulty and to articulate the struggle of being a queer poet. Martin identifies the ‘plight of the homosexual in heterosexual society,’ and that plight does indeed exist today with the current body politic being ambiguous and antagonistic towards queer folk. Perhaps a solution isn’t what’s at hand, but instead the tools to articulate queer struggle and queer sexuality is at the core of the relationship between Cole and Crane. Through that close examination, examining the poetics of difficulty through Cole’s literary predecessors becomes an integral into investigating how his poetics operate in a queer American framework.

Through the three angles of the Apollonian-Dionysian, the confessional framework, and a queer framework, a synthesis of each aspect is how I articulate the ‘queer confessional’ framework through Cole’s poetics. Of course, much like the individual terms ‘queer’ and ‘confessional’ themselves, the queer confessional is not a fixed monolith. The nomenclature and frameworks of the queer confessional are Apollonian insofar as there are certain tropes (humor or an element of truth) that appear, but the subversive and elusive nature of the queer confessional itself is its Dionysian queerness. It is a term in which a nominative definition would prove unproductive, precisely because the queer confessional is girded by two terms whose definitions are built to be unstable. This introduction has only taken a brief foray into each of these three angles, but this paper will delve deeper into building the framework of the queer confessional. In doing so, perhaps we can further the project of re-defining what confessional poetics means in our current literary landscape and how it is inseparable from the realms of queerness and the body politic.

## FRAMED DISORDERS

### *The Apollonian-Dionysian in Poetic Verse*

“To write what is human, not escapist: / that is the problem of my hand moving / apart from my body” – Henri Cole, *Apollo*

To where does one begin to define the terms ‘Apollonian’ or ‘Dionysian?’ These two terms, often taken together as the Apollonian-Dionysian literary framework, are a critical juncture to envision the practical terms of the queer confessional. The Apollonian is useful in ‘framing’ the poetic verse, setting a structure to which one can ‘read’ the poem in from line to line and identify its basic structure. Under a binary reading, the Dionysian seems to be the opposite. According to Rafael Lopez Pedraza, “we encounter a contradictory nature, we encounter irrationality” in the Dionysian schema. In the context of poetics itself, Pedraza’s denotative encounter is a chaos within the verse, in which feeling and the blurring of truth is paramount in addition to the ordering of language assembly. Henri Cole’s poetics confronts both the Apollonian and Dionysian schemas in what I term as a ‘framed disorder.’ Langdon Hammer most cogently notes of Cole’s verse as a “formal presence of his poems on the page to be balanced and calm, but their spirit to be drunken, pulsing, and unpredictable.” Careful language assembly is the manifestation of Hammer’s observation of the ‘balanced and calm’ atmosphere of Cole’s verse, but within that tightly assembled frame lies the ‘pulsing’ disorder and chaos of Cole’s complications of truth and confession. I take Hammer’s statements one step further and I argue that the presence of the Apollonian-Dionysian dynamic is a necessary part of outlining Cole’s verse as queer and confessional. Both the Apollonian and Dionysian are inseparable and act as conduits in exploring the necessity of the conceit of contradiction, in which both order and madness co-exist with one another as that ‘framed disorder.’

I will first trace how Cole manifests the Apollonian in his verse by examining how he establishes order and structure with an emphasis on his earlier poetry. An early collection, *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*, published in 1989 and his second published collection, is particularly formalist in which Cole is careful in the craft of verse through the usage of patterns, especially when it comes to line endings and enjambments. “American Girl” is one poem that is especially exemplary of Cole’s poetic order:

Gone now was the seasonal crowd  
after twelve weeks south  
fleeting in their battered taxis  
to the island airstrip,  
its moonstruck macadam glinting  
like a purple pass to civilization. (8-12)

The key to noting the establishment of pattern of line breaking is noting how Cole breaks his lines. Written in non-rhyming couplets, each line seems to be encased in its own ‘subject’ matter, only breaking when there is a follow up of logic. Line 8 has Cole’s speaker remarking the disappearance of a ‘seasonal crowd,’ but breaks the line when the speaker then utters the temporal marker of ‘twelve weeks.’ In a hypothetical, the two lines flow well if they are to be taken as one singular line. Thus, they belie a structural order of mundane logics that Cole constructs to display the Apollonian impulse. That Apollonian is then taken a step further through the strategic line breaks in which there is a ‘follow up’ line. This also appears in the second quartet of the quoted passage, the ‘battered taxis’ that flee ‘to the island airstrip.’ The images themselves seem to be surreal and almost non-logical in nature, for what use does a battered taxi have to an island airstrip, especially in such a poem whose line breaks are strict?

While the images of the verse matter, it is the Apollonian order which frames the Dionysian chaos of the lines. However, the framing of order is more apparent, and illuminating the orderly nature of Cole's verse requires us to look towards Paul Saagpakk's research on the Apollonian in the context of Wallace Stevens and Aleksis Rannit. Saagpakk defines this Apollonian impulse through the context of form, in which "it is only form, form gracefully sculptured, which can bear the issue of meditation" (161). The precise mediation that Saagpakk discusses is the "expression of creativity," one in which the Dionysiac must be then restrained in order to "deal with human emotions on the abstract rather than an exclusive sensuous plane" (161). Focusing on how form is paramount to the issue of meditation helps to elucidate form by way of how Cole seems to hold back the Dionysian impulse. Indeed, Cole meditates on the concept of the "American Girl" on an abstract level, not letting an 'actual' physical girl be described on the verse except being only described as 'her.' However, I resist Saagpakk's notion of the Dionysian being restrained for human emotion. While I do mention that Cole does 'hold back' the Dionysian, the holding back of the Dionysian impulse is to allow order to amplify human emotions on the sensuous level. Indeed, the Apollonian is used as a conduit to channel the Dionysian energies into intense pockets that are chaotic insofar as Cole utilizes order to 'contain' them within the verse. This containment is the pattern that Cole deploys to amplify the inward and outward chaos of the Dionysian impulse.

I thus motion towards utilizing Saagpakk's framework of form, but applying it towards the physical construction of the poem itself by identifying a pattern in how the lines are placed and indented. "Papilloma," another poem from *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*, is a poem in which its indents are indicative of Cole's Apollonian impulse for order. Written in 10 quatrains with the

occasional rhyme, “Papilloma” is a poem that seems to belie an overtly orderly sense of poetic aesthetic. The poem starts off stylistically formal:

Naked, horizontal, marooned  
beetlelike on my spine,  
a snow-white scroll of tissue unwound  
beneath me, I lie puffy-eyed (1-4)

The initial images of the poem are deliberately enigmatic but also unsettling and humorous, in which Cole carefully assembles the first two lines to deliver an uncertain image of a papilloma, playing to the tragic circumstances of a papilloma’s growth. However, Cole carefully constructs the deployment of language first and foremost here, in which the ‘beetlelike’ relays the papilloma condition towards an imagery of a bug, a nuisance to the body. Despite that, the papilloma causes the speaker to ‘lie puffy-eyed,’ in which the surreal humor of an insect-like appearance disease becomes an unsettling moment of bodily weakness, one in which Cole’s speaker is wrapped under ‘tissue.’ The focus on the images belies the discord of bodily breakdown, but it is doubly framed by the Apollonian style of language construction as well as an additional frame of the line constructions, which are the indents and line endings. Cole frames the ‘disorder’ of bodily breakdown through the careful construction of the physical layout of the poem on the page. Each stanza of “Papilloma” is organized in a pattern where every second line is indented in comparison to its preceding lines, with the first and each odd-numbered line being formatted formally. The indentation of each line persists despite the nature and content of what each is saying, with the poem progressively confronting the implications of the body being broken down by the papilloma. However, the consistent framing of the poem is critical to seeing the Apollonian in practice, as it is that pattern of indentation is what frames and ‘holds back’ the

Dionysian feeling. However, I make a distinction here. The feeling is 'held back' insofar as it is being made subtle through Cole's careful language construction, but I posit that it is through the contradiction of holding back the Dionysian impulse in which the Cole utilizes the contradictory function of utilizing the Apollonian order to bolster, not erase, human feeling.

It is in this pattern in which the contradiction, primarily from the Apollonian impulse, is at stake in unpacking Cole's Apollonian-Dionysian framework. This contradiction is at the root of beginning to unveil how Cole, even in his most Apollonian moments, is working upon a queer methodology by troubling the impulse of form by keeping the intensity of human emotions within layers of frames. I motion towards analyzing a few parts of the Apollo myth, specifically citing Helene Deutsch's psychoanalytic reading of Apollo through her analysis of Apollo's queerness (or in particular: his bisexuality), especially in his pursuit of Daphne:

Apollo in his more human aspect was a kind of Don Juan; he had many love affairs, and his interest in girls was specifically directed toward those who resisted. Thus even when women were his lovers, he conceived of them as enemies to overcome...Apollo's unsuccessful pursuit of Daphne shows us again the imperfect, human side of the great god (72)

While Deutsch's analysis may capitulate under a contemporary reading of Apollo, his 'human' side is key to how Cole directs the energy of the Apollonian in his verse. The myth of Apollo is a reflection of the aesthetics of the Apollonian literary impulse, one in which his pursuit of aesthetic is similar to a poet's aim towards a carefully crafted poetic sculpture. Yet, form is not invulnerable to the Dionysian flow of feeling, and the 'unsuccessful pursuit' that Deutsch points towards is a moment in which the binary of the Apollonian-Dionysian becomes troubled and porous. Even 'framing' and poetic order themselves become discordant. Much like how Apollo

shows an imperfect side, the very chaos of “Papilloma,” “American Girl,” and perhaps even the whole of *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* itself is informed by an Apollonian that is “imperfect” in form. While its frames try to adhere to an aesthetic of, to borrow from Hammer, being ‘balanced and calm’ on the page, there is a disorder that even begins in the frame itself, that stems from the intense pockets of feeling that are present in Cole’s verse. These intense pockets of feeling are not necessarily in conflict in with the Apollonian frames, but do trouble and complicate their functions. That is the Dionysian impulse within Cole’s poetics.

I then turn towards James Porter’s research on Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* to articulate the Dionysian framework that Cole operates in. I take particular interest in how Porter analyzes *The Birth of Tragedy*’s final chapter in regards to the return of “a musical spirit” in which he inscribes the Dionysian as being rooted in modern music aesthetic:

...the distinctive features of Dionysian music are explicitly conjoined with more “innovations” in “tonality,” which is to say the modern expressive medium. The same tendency is reconfirmed in the second section of *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*...where we find Dionysus associated with “tone,” “melody,” and “harmony,” the characteristic triad of the modern musical sensibility for Nietzsche (151).

Putting this in conversation with Cole’s poetics, I read Porter’s identifications of “innovations” as a poetic chaos when transfiguring Dionysian music into a post-modern poetic aesthetic. Reading poetry itself as a form of ‘music,’ looking at “tone” provides a framework to which to apply a Dionysian perspective to Cole’s Apollonian frames. To use the associations commonly connotated with Dionysus to “un-wind” the frames of the Apollonian and to view the Dionysian as a deliberately disordered poetics that are contained within these pockets. While I am not

necessarily interested in exploring a musical tonality of the verse, Porter provides us a framework to ‘play’ around with, especially as we begin to contemplate Cole’s later works in which the Apollonian frames aren’t as tightly enforced as seen in *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*. Patternistic Apollonian tendencies become less apparent as the Dionysian impulse and musicality begin to take the forefront.

*The Visible Man*, as Cole’s fourth published collection, is the moment where the Dionysian impulse is more ‘apparent’ on the verse insofar as there is a necessary line between the Apollonian and Dionysian. While Apollonian layers of frame are still present, the Dionysian impulse is presented through Cole’s terseness of verse which intensifies the ‘madness’ and ‘human feeling’ of the verse. Perhaps fittingly, we can find Cole’s most Dionysian moments in “Apollo,” a sequence of 14 poems located at the end of the collection. In the seventh part of the sequence, Cole enacts an Apollonian motion of each line being alternated on opposite sides, crafting a poem that would not seem out of place in *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*:

Dirt so fine it is like flour.

Dirt mixed with ice.

Huge expanses of it.

The ground frozen.

With deep exceptional holes.

This is what I see

spilling down a nave.

Then Daddy kissing

a cardinal’s ring. (1-9)

Sequence VII of “Apollo” is marked with a deep Dionysian impulse of humorous feeling that is made possible through the Apollonian frame of its terseness. However, what is operating differently here is that the Dionysian is on a ‘slippage,’ to which the sexual humor of this part of Apollo is amplified precisely due to the Dionysian impulse ‘slipping’ through the Apollonian by way of Apollonian amplification. I particularly take attention to ‘deep exceptional holes’ and ‘Daddy kissing a cardinal’s ring.’ The careful construction of each phrase is in tune to Cole’s close attention to the implications of double or even triple entendre. The ‘exceptional holes’ may be taken literally, but they also suggest that the ‘ground’ has a sexual orifice at play in which the hole waits to be penetrated. The sexual, Dionysian, energies of the lines are further continued when Cole’s speaker articulates a ‘spilling’ of a substance towards a nave, a locational word that sets up the implications of the sacred. The ‘sacred’ nave is an Apollonian motion, in which the nave in its denotative is a centrifugal aspect of a church building, where most of a congregation would cluster. The ‘spilled’ substance is a Dionysian profanity on the sacred, ‘untouchable’ nave, but it is through the Apollonian frames which emblemizes the framing of the nave as the point of gravity to which Cole directs the ‘profane.’

A close reading of Sequence of “Apollo” is a good juncture point to analyze Cole’s Dionysian impulses. The profanity of the ‘nave’ is not just sexual pleasure at work, it is also what Tsu-Ching Su would define as:

The Dionysian is an excessive figure of thought, a figure in excess of the metaphysics of presence, a figure that disrupts that delimit the individual subject, and a figure that violates the *principum individuations* of the Apollinian (91).

The ‘excess figure of thought’ is what Cole’s speaker sees flowing down to the ‘nave.’

Coalescing into the sexual pleasure of language assembly, it is through the ‘spilling down a

nave' in which Cole enacts Su's observation of the violation of the Apollonian framework. In order for the Dionysian to operate as the delimiting, the limit must be established as the individuated Apollonian. There must be a *thing* for Cole to 'violate,' in which what is violated is the individuated and self-contained verses, in order for there to be an 'excess.' It is not the verse that is necessarily in excess, it is the very feeling of the assembling a poetic body itself which goes beyond the constraints of human emotion. I again turn towards Rafael Lopez Pedraza to elucidate how Dionysus' affects on the body, in which he writes "it is not only through powerful emotions that Dionysus makes his epiphany on the body. His ways can be subtler, he can appear in connection with the intimacy of one's own feelings" (34). Thus, the intimacy of the 'nave' in Cole's Apollo is an 'excess' due to how Cole locates the feelings in the internal frameworks of what I propose as the poetic body. I define this poetic body as the Apollonian 'frame' through which Cole situates and builds the physical shape of the poem. As it is 'within' the poetic body, the intimacy is rooted with a confrontation of the 'self,' and thus the speaker is constructed as a Dionysian operating in an Apollonian theater. There is no externality to which Cole enacts a Dionysian madness. The Dionysian madness is housed within the Apollonian body. Through Pedraza's observation of Dionysus being an intimate figure within one's own body, the 'feeling' of constructing a pleasure out of a poetic body is not merely a mechanical action, Dionysian madness is innate within the body itself.

The subtlety of the Dionysian impulse is critical in reading Cole's later works, in which the Apollonian frame recedes into the background as an omnipresent poetic presence rather than an overbearing presence on Cole's poetic bodies. This paper has already begun to address the notions of a pleasure from language assembly without an explicit articulation, but I motion towards focusing on a closer look at how Cole articulates the poetic body and assembles it with a

Dionysian framework in mind. I look towards another poem from Cole's *The Visible Man*, titled "The Color of Feeling and the Feeling of Color," as a way to analyze the chaos of Cole's language assembly.

All those centuries  
of vengeance and maw, recapped in an hour  
clung to the mind like marble dust.  
The nerves sat crumbling  
like opus reticulatum—  
little tufa boxes piled in a phalanx,  
lantern-lit at the end of the tunnel. (25-31)

The Dionysian impulse through language assembly is at work through the careful, Apollonian-like language assembly that Cole enacts in the poem. Looking at the passage with Pedraza's observation in mind, a cursory reading of the verse does not outline an 'obvious' Dionysian madness. However, a closer reading reveals a chaos that begins in the images that Cole constructs, which recursively returns to a feeling of Dionysian intimacy. Turning to the poem itself, these lines appear after surreal images of orphic myth that are juxtaposed within themselves, a 'water buffalo' that frames the 'centuries of vengeance and maw.' We are thus introduced to a chaotic world to which 'vengeance' is linked to the paradigm of time that the speaker operates in. Thus, even the poetic body is entrapped in a chaos of 'vengeance', further complicated through 'the nerves' that are 'crumbling.' Cole's poetic body is in flux and may well capitulate under its own madness, but the poetic chaos is not articulated as an overbearing madness in the verse that would lead the verse to become unnecessarily sloppy. Instead, Cole's

project of language assembly is one of intense deliberation; an intimate poetics of process that is a careful play of order to create a constructed chaos which intimately flows from the self.

‘Like opus reticulatum,’ is the physical articulation of such a language assembly that is uttered in the verse itself. These ‘opus reticulatum,’ which are brickwork in ancient Roman architecture, are a signification of Cole’s poetic body in which the poem ‘builds’ upon itself. Thus, Cole’s poem is operating on multiple ‘meta’ senses, one in which Cole builds the poetic body of the poem through piling the phalanxes in a vein to the opus reticulatum, and another where the opus reticulatum of the poem is a careful assembly of Greek and Roman myth through the intimate deliberation of words. The physical space for the speaker is just as miniscule as the tufa boxes, but this space is the container for Dionysian madness. The very madness is in the compact subtlety of the verse. Pedraza succinctly summarizes this Dionysian impulse through remarking on how Dionysus enacts madness on himself, in which “he is himself both the cause of and liberator from madness...it can be seen as the expression of a natural rhythm of the psyche, a Dionysian rhythm” (22-23). The poem’s intimate madness is a confrontation and the cause of madness, but it is through the intimacy and subtlety of the Dionysian language assembly is how Cole’s speaker, and perhaps Cole himself, finds liberation. The liberation of madness is perhaps ‘lantern-lit at the end of the tunnel,’ the locational ‘ending’ to the passage in which the ‘end of the tunnel’ is the ending of the recursive Dionysian madness. This marks only a temporary ending, but the rhythmic nature of the Dionysian belies a cycle, and perhaps the ‘centuries of maw and vengeance’ will continue forth a Dionysian madness that refuses an end.

In articulating how the Apollonian and Dionysian are constructed, I turn towards the synthesis of both spheres in the project of outlining the queerness of Cole’s poetics. Much of this paper up to this point has been spent analyzing the Apollonian and Dionysian as individuated

spheres, while keeping both frameworks in contact with each other. Taken together, the ‘framed disorder’ of Cole’s verse is the fundamental troubling of binaries in which the very order of the Apollonian intensifies the Dionysian spirit of liberation. Cole’s poetics, through language assembly and poetic order, are exercises in liberating the self from binary and engaging in lyric queerness. The utilization of an Apollonian-Dionysian framework is already present in *The Visible Man*, and its most salient example of a troubling of binaries is found in “Anagram”:

Scrawling the letters of my name  
I found and changed what I became

first, HERON LICE emerged,  
like shame usurping dignity

Then LION CHEER assembled,  
as if proof I was palimpsest (1-6)

What is troubled here is the notion of ‘nomos,’ or the name. The rigid marker of identity is destabilized through Cole anagramming his name through multiple forms, liberating the Apollonian construct of the name by enacting a Dionysian liberation to nomos. In the quoted passage, there are two examples of Cole’s anagrammed name, creating the surreal images that are a constant pattern in Cole’s larger bibliography. ‘HERON LICE’ is an example of an anagram that juxtaposes between both words’ images. The graceful, sacred, and clean ‘HERON’ is contrasted with a ‘LICE,’ a dirty and ‘profane’ animal. However, to put the words in a binary is counterproductive to a queer Apollonian-Dionysian reading, and thus, the combination and construction of ‘HERON LICE’ is what proves critical to Cole’s ‘framed disorder.’ The ‘frame’

is the name, but the ‘disorder’ is the de-stabilization of a binary. Cole enacts such a de-stabilization in two prongs, one in the sense of the binary between the sacred and the profane, and another in the binary of the Apollonian and Dionysian. Both, not one or the other, are necessary.

A return to Tsu-Ching Su’s study on the Dionysian will help us further elucidate not only the notion of a troubled nomos, but also in the further implications of troubling the Apollonian-Dionysian dynamic. Su frames Dionysian liberation as a way of legitimizing forms of suffering, while juxtaposing the Apollonian as an illusory construct that bypass suffering. She writes:

...whereas the Apollinian dream world attempts to transcend suffering by luminous dreams, the Dionysian nourishes the capacity for suffering itself which permits us to see suffering as a legitimate part of life, as much as pleasure and exaltation (96)

While Su does provide a helpful juxtaposition in the context of suffering, I do resist the binary in which Su seems to pit the Apollonian and Dionysian as a construct of ‘transcending’ suffering to its nourishment. A Dionysian nourishment of suffering is present in Cole’s verse, which is salient in “Anagram.” I focus on the sound of “LION CHEER” as a way to elucidate the legitimacy of suffering, one in which Cole writes his body into existence. “LION CHEER,” if pronounced deliberately, can be made to sound like ‘lie on chair,’ and Cole ‘assembles’ the “LION CHEER” as a ‘proof’ of his body’s existence. By doing so, it is proof of the nourishment of suffering, in which lying on the chair legitimizes bodily pain through articulating it in two prongs, one through de-stabilizing the name to inscribe his body into existence and creating a surreal base image of a cheering lion to create a subtle Dionysian madness behind the name itself. However, the Apollonian frame of the necessary to enact the nourishment of suffering. In Cole’s

framework, Su's identification of a dream world cannot materialize as the Apollonian frames the world and chaos of the Dionysian. The act of transcendence is enacted by the Dionysian nourishment, which allows for suffering and liberation. However, the Apollonian is the omnipresent framework which is intimately tied to the operation of the Dionysian, much as the presence of nomos is the omnipresent framework of "Anagram" itself. "LION CHEER" cannot exist if "HENRI COLE" was not inscribed. Instead, the Apollonian is the base framework for suffering to occur.

In our continued synthesis of the Apollonian-Dionysian, how does this configure in Cole's later verse? The following collection, *Middle Earth*, a collection of poems inspired by his birth origin of Japan, published in 2003, provides us poems that display a further developing interiority and Dionysian madness. However, the Apollonian remains a distinct presence in his 21<sup>st</sup> century oeuvre. If *The Visible Man* is the beginnings of troubling a binary, *Middle Earth* is twisting the binary upon itself. I turn towards one of the initial poems in the collection, "Powdered Milk," to begin my analysis:

Come to the garden, you said,  
and I went, hearing my voice inside  
your throat. It was my way of self-forgetting.  
Or was it a way of facing self,  
I did not know.

The troubling of transcendence is furthered in this poem due to the conflicting notions of the self that Cole's speaker presents. There is a crisis of inscribing a 'self,' as a binary notion has been de-constructed to the point where the line between 'self-forgetting' and 'facing self' is delineated. That line is perhaps non-essential; what is more critical is the very movement of the

voice itself, which is locating in another body. I return to Langdon Hammer, in which he stakes a further step against transcendence, where he argues “The body in these poems cannot be transcended—or isolated as an end of itself...The life that the poets wants to celebrate is both of the body and of the spirit” (65). The process of synthesis is in the step of figuring out how to inscribe a ‘third’ framework, one in which transcendence is no longer available as an option. Even Cole confronts such an inability, in which ‘I did not know’ represents the body being unable to be ‘insolated as an end of itself.’ If Cole’s speaker does not know, then there is no end to which to isolate the body. The poem itself plays to that framework, with the impossibility of the body’s isolation finding root in the voice’s dislocation. With this in mind, the celebration of the body and spirit is what’s at stake in the synthesis of the Apollonian-Dionysian. Cole, as a poet, does not and will not inscribe binaries, for a duality serves as an unproductive methodology to separate body and spirit. The third option of having both body and spirit, and consequently Apollonian and Dionysian, as operatives in verse is key to poetic liberation. With poetic liberation, it also engenders queerness.

Thus, a ‘framed disorder’ proves a critical framework to which to read Cole’s verse through the Apollonian-Dionysian. His Apollonian tendencies were readily apparent in his earlier works, crafting them to be essential to his verse and as a way of enacting a formalist verse. However, as Cole settled into his Dionysian voice, the ‘madness’ of his verse begins to flow, pulsing subtly from the verse as the Apollonian recedes into an omnipresent form. It is within the analysis of both frameworks together in which Cole’s lyric queerness comes to light. However, how do we configure the Apollonian-Dionysian into the formulation of a queer confessional? It is precisely within the liberation of the body and lyric verse is where the energy of a queer confession lies. What is at stake is not just poetic liberation, but the liberation of the

queer body to articulate queer confession. The blurring of the Apollonian-Dionysian presents the framework to which a schema of liberation is articulated as the troubling of poetic order to facilitate 'madness.' That schema is at the heart of the model of the 'framed disorder,' and it creates an initial outline of the queer confessional's appearance. A queer confession must be in a liberated paradigm in order to exercise queerness, and thus, a 'framed disorder' acts as the very frame for the queer confessional model itself. However, we have only begun to build the foundation of the queer confessional, and further work beyond the Apollonian-Dionysian model needs to be done to take our model to its next stage. Thus, this is where I turn the paper towards a construction of the confessional model with Cole's poetics.

## MOTHERS AND SELF-PORTRAITS

### *Configuring the Confessional*

“All of life was there—love, death, memory— / as the eyes rolled back into the wrinkled sleeve / of the head, and five or six tears—profound, / unflinching, humane—ran out of her skull” –

Henri Cole, *Dead Mother*

A 2004 interview by Henri Cole, conducted by Christopher Hennessy, reveals a framing to which I examine how Cole configures confessional poetry. Answering a question about style in regards to *Middle Earth*, Cole answers “Now I want the poem of language (or style) to uplift and reinforce the poem of emotion. To write only a poem of language or only a poem of emotion is not enough.” Elucidating Cole’s lucid points, the ‘emotion’ of a confessional-esque poetics is necessary for the aesthetic expression that Cole is working towards, but the necessity of the reinforcement of style is a recursive acknowledgment of the Apollonian-Dionysian framework acknowledged in the previous section. However, a poetics of ‘emotion’ configures as a methodology for which to work upon untangling how a confessional framework operates in Cole’s poetics. Yet, Cole himself has a relationship of distrust to confessional poetics, to which he finds a similar quandary with Elizabeth Bishop. His aversion to confessional poetics is rooted in how he defines the term, in which he says to Sasha Weiss for *The Paris Review*, “A confessional poem is more diary-like and confined to the here and now and without much aesthetic dignity.” In configuring the confessional model to Cole’s poetics, it is necessary that we re-define confessional poetics away from the mode of aesthetic towards a definition of questioning the fundamental creation of truth-making. Through a new paradigm of viewing the confessional as a way of troubling truth as not only just a poetic gesture, but also through a political lens, we can begin to reconcile Cole’s resistance to the term, which is in line with

historical scholarship that views confessional poetics as a monolithic schema of lacking aesthetic. I argue that confessional poetics is not merely a mode of verse steeped in the personal, it is a mode that is intimately rooted with a political and societal function by precisely reflecting the present moment and context to which it was written in. This reflection of its temporal moment, which is both historical and personal to its subject, is the locus point of troubling the notions of the constructions of truth through which the individuated subject cannot be separated from society's auspices.

To begin our project of coding the confessional mode in Cole's poetics, I turn towards how the mother figure is constructed as an omnipresent entity in his verse. The mother's positioning is a turn towards the autobiographical nexus of Cole's poetics, of which Peter Nickowitz identifies as being present in Cole's inspirations in Hart Crane and Elizabeth Bishop in a chapter in *Rhetoric and Sexuality* where he explicitly traces the appearance of the mother figure in the poetics of Crane and Bishop. Nickowitz provides an elucidating frame that fashions a critical backdrop to frame the confessional-esque moments in Cole's poetics, in which he writes, "The autobiographical impulse can be as explicit as describing a personal experience or it can be a desire to express a sensation, arising out of a factual experience but that does not include a representation of the experience itself" (54). Nickowitz's identification of the factual experience lacking identification is where the necessary slippage and aesthete of the confessional mode applies. We see this framework of autobiographical impulse appearing in Cole's work through the omnipresence of the maternal figure. Indeed, a Mother figure appears in Cole's *The Visible Man* in the poem "Childlessness" as an entity that has already died but enacts a still-resonating presence. Cole's mother is a post-mortem figure reanimated to stake a claim towards her son: "...When you died, Mother, / I was alone at last. And then you came back, / dismal and

greedy like the sea, to reclaim me” (13-15). In these three lines, the mother is an omnipresent figure after death, in which the maternal returns in an act of reclamation towards the speaker. This singular moment in “Childlessness” is emblematic of the appearance of a confessional mode under Nickowitz’s framework of a non-representational identification of factual experience. Doubt can certainly be raised at the maternal figure’s death in a literal, autobiographical rendering of Cole’s poetics in which we can posit the question of the specific experience behind “Childlessness.” However, Cole’s confessional moment is the slippage of the factual truth with the appearance of the mother figure. The critical juncture towards a reading of this personal moment is Cole’s re-folding back into the family structure. The ‘mother’ figure stands as an immortal figure through the sensuous ‘reclamation’ of the speaker. A rendering of the immortal mother is the fundamental troubling of truth-making, and that troubling is the foundational confessional mode that Cole’s poetics operate upon.

The maternal figure finds a further omnipresence in Cole’s *Middle Earth Poems*, in which the sequence of “Casablanca Lily” and the titular poem, “Middle Earth,” embeds the maternal’s omnipresence through select appearances within the verse through which she is not the primary, but embedded subject. Indeed, Cole’s ‘Mother’ is a seemingly transient figure in these poems especially in regards to quantifying her appearance. With “Casablanca Lily,” the maternal figure frames the poem’s beginning and end, in which I focus my analysis on the poem’s introductory notes as Cole writes, “It has the odor of Mother leaving / when I was a boy. / I watch the back / of her heck, wanting to cry, Come back. Come back!” (1-3). It is critical to note that the subjectivity of the poem is rooted in the “Casablanca Lily,” through which the maternal is the adjective smell in which Cole demonstrates a queer confessional moment through placing the moment of separation through the praxis of smell. Insofar as I critically hew to the

qualities of the confessional genre, Cole does not demonstrate the scintillating, image-esque verse of confessional poetics as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, or Bishop would practice. Instead, Cole defies image through tracing the 'loss' of the mother through the subjectivity of the poem's titular subject. The 'smell' of the lilies operates as the confessional-esque image that expands the possibilities of the confessional through which the image of the 'smell' transforms into a humorous, erotic cry for the transient mother figure. Indeed, the 'smell' is one prong to which to trace the queerness of this confessional moment, but another prong lies within the cries of 'Come back. Come back!.' Nickowitz provides a useful intervention to which to further frame this moment as a 'queer confessional,' to which he writes on the connection between the homoerotic and the maternal:

The connection between homoerotic and mother-erotic desire reveals the degree to which ambivalence plays a crucial role in both of these structures of desire...Specifically, desire for the mother functions as a basis for homoerotic desire. The juxtaposition of these desires also serves to reinforce their connection with, and frequent representation as, loss (54).

Nickowitz's theoretical paradigm of desire's ambivalence is a suitable way to articulate the notion of the omnipresent maternal's transience in Cole's poetics. The manifestation of ambivalence is articulated through the loss of the maternal, through which Cole's cries of 'Come back. Come back!' is the moment to which Cole enacts mother-eroticism and queerness in simultaneous fashion. His 'confession' of desiring the mother's return is queer insofar as we witness the desire for the physical, maternal presence as a pathological reaction to the loss of transience. Thus, what is at stake for the confessional and queer confessional model is precisely how the maternal's omnipresence troubles formulations of poetic genre constructions precisely

due to the ambivalent nature of the mother figure. Maternal omnipresence troubles confessional image and, in accordance to Nickowitz's framework, must also be necessarily queer.

The troubling of image is also the troubling of a subjective and objective truth. If one must force an impositional reading on Cole's lyric verse, perhaps it is the 'feeling' and unsettling of truth (the Dionysian paradigm) that is at stake in Cole's confessional moments. However, what occurs when the maternal figure's omnipresence operates beyond death? The first part of Henri Cole's *Touch* is precisely the exploration of a post-mortem maternal omnipresence through an intimate tracing of the mother figure's death. The ending of the maternal sequence, represented by the titular poem "Touch," is where we identify the moment of an immortal maternal presence. Cole frames the immortal mother through an unclear, deliberately queered vision of a funeral procession through which Cole's speaker enacts the lowering of the casket with the intention of being located next to his mother. Indeed, the funerary framework is queered through which Cole frames the confessional nature of his grief through placing his own body and spatiality next to the mother figure; while at the same time cloistering the language to resist the traditional mark of the scintillating, clear-image of the confessional. This moment is most saliently seen as Cole writes:

Then I lay down beside you,  
dissolving loneliness,  
and the white maggots wriggled

As the preacher spoke,  
no one seemed to hear him,  
tamping their eyes, touching one another. (24-29)

The troubling of truth is performed in these six lines, through which Cole lies down with the mother figure represented through the 'you.' The sparseness of Cole's verse is a deliberate troubling that destabilizes the confessional-esque language of the surrealist action of Cole's speaker lying near the dead mother's body. Indeed, the poetic images present in the verse are ones that do take an active refusal elucidate a clear truth. The notion of truth is instead presented as a slippage through which the surrealism of Cole's 'lying down' with the mother figure is not meant to be taken as a literal. Instead, Cole invites the reader to question precisely what is being confessed through poetic sparseness. The affect of grief is the emphasis that Cole's speaker places as the onus to which to read the confessional moment of maternal loss. There are no 'white maggots' that physically wriggle as Cole's speaker imagines himself to lie down next to his mother's grave, but the image of the maggot serves as the facilitation of that affective grief. The poetic body and maternal grief intersect to trouble and queer the confessional form, through which this very moment is queer confession.

I gesture towards the larger point of this paper of which Cole's intensely personal poetics with the maternal figure both resists and plays with confessional form that is in conversation with Nickowitz's framework of a queerness with and within the maternal relationship. Cole thus displays moments of queer confession in the realm of the personal and private, but to further lucidly build our queer confessional framework, we must simultaneously work upon how Cole's confessional moments are necessarily post-confessional yet also situate themselves upon a dually private and political/societal context. To foreground a theoretical background of how a post-confessional moment becomes necessarily a political function, Amy Robbins' salient identification of the literary history behind the 'death of the author' proves fruitful:

Indeed, the Language school taking shape during this period in the Bay Area, Washington D.C., and New York positioned itself in strategic resistance to mainstream American poetry, staging a poetic politics of opposition to a literary establishment that continued in many cases to insist on the necessity of the stable lyric subject. At root, the Language school of poetics fashioned itself as inherently political, concerned precisely with disrupting what Lyotard terms “the solace of good forms” – including and especially the form of the lyric subject – in a move toward self-consciously activist, anti-bourgeois, anti-patriarchal, anti-establishment political texts (77).

Cole’s formally published work would not crest until the late 1980s, but it certainly wouldn’t be unreasonable to gesture that Cole was certainly informed by the ‘Language school of poetics’ that Robbins identifies as poetic resistance. Buttressed in her salient analysis of poetic history is the foundation of post-confession, of which its goals are “a poetics that will offer hope and a new way of theorizing personal agency” (77). However, identifying a denotative of a post-confessional mode of poetics proves a difficult task, especially as the poets that Robbins identifies as reaching towards a post-confessional troubling of the lyric ‘I’ (Lyn Hejinian, Alicia Ostriker, and Alice Notley) all have different yet equally valuable conceptions of post-confession. There is no doubting that Cole himself has a conception of post-confession that wildly differs from the aforementioned poets; and indeed, his mode of post-confessional is a resistance to its necessarily ‘originating’ form.

Thus, I turn towards Cole’s ‘Self-portraits,’ which themselves function as Cole’s moments of articulating confession through which he bears witness to his private, internal self. Miranda Sherwin’s study on confessional poetics is thus necessary as a backdrop in regards to

formalizing a critical inquiry into the poetic genres of confessional and post-confessional, especially in regards to the former. Sherwin fundamentally describes confessional poetics as “autobiographical, deriving directly from the author’s experiences, which tend to be traumatic; confessional poetry abounds in instances of mental illness, self-destruction, and the deterioration of family relationships” (96) and further situates these tropes working as a collective that itself is central to the American literary and poetic canon. Citing directly from M.L. Rosenthal to establish this definition, it serves as a useful frame of reference in reading Cole’s ‘Self-portrait’ poetics, but Sherwin’s definition is not meant to be a fixated definition that drives my analysis. The presence of personal pain is instead meant to bolster the political and societal functions of poetic confession. Indeed, it is precisely talking about the ‘self’ to which Cole bears witness to his own post-confessional, and perhaps queer confessional, moment.

An interview in the *Washington Square Review* by Elisa Gonzalez lucidly shines a complex yet personal reasoning to Cole’s writing of self-portraits, to which Cole answers Gonzalez’s question of his being drawn to self-portrait with, “When I was a young man, I wanted to be a visual artist. Perhaps my self-portraits are an homage to this part of myself that never came to be.” These self-portraits are moments of confession towards an idealized past ‘self’ that did not bear into an explicit fruition, which itself already troubles the normative conception of a poetic confessional moment. Of course, a turn towards the visual may be laced with trauma, but it is necessary to be attentive to the troubling of a truth that finds root in subtle autobiography through which Cole does not rely upon a ‘diary-like’ dedication in documenting his confessional poetics. Instead, Cole disrupts truth towards the figuration of a self that isn’t necessarily idealized or worshipped and yet still carries with it a verity of truth; for they are a confession of a conditional self that could’ve well existed. With these notions in mind, I turn towards an early

example of Cole's self-portraits, 'Self-Portrait as Four Styles of Pompeian Wall Painting,' from *The Visible Man*:

Since they found the bloodless little girl,  
with voluptuous lips, buried in me,  
I am unsentimental. I do not see  
the gold sky at sunset but blackbirds hurled  
like lava stones. I am like a severed  
finger lost in the wreckage forever (9-14)

At stake in this being his first 'self-portrait' poem is the underpinning of visuality that reverberates not just through the quoted passage, but through the rest of the poem itself. Cole's 'first style' of painting presents him as the queered figure of a female that is 'buried in him,' embodied with 'voluptuous lips.' Indeed, the figure of the girl is rooted with the speaker's unsaid body, blurring gender lines and the truth to Cole's speaker's identity into an unknown. The very aims of this confessional, or what is being confessed specifically, are left deliberately unclear through the poem's unclear language and enjambed end-lines. Cole's first self-portrait revels in its lack of clarity. Its moment of clearest confession lies in these lines, in which Cole's speaker is "like a severed finger lost in the wreckage forever," a disembodied finger and queer body lost in the wreckage of trying to find an 'ideal' self, but instead only finds rumination and discordant language in the 'wreckage.'

This discordant self-portrait, with its lack of that clear, scintillating image of a confessional poem, can be taken to operate under the framework of a post-confessional. There is a clear confessional moment, but precisely what is being confessed is rooted in the instability of truth and language. The theoretical underpinnings of post-confession have been explored with

Robbins' work with Alice Notley, but the political underpinnings of Cole's post-confession are deeply embedded with the largely personal nature of the gender binary he complicates. In fact, what he performs with self-portraits seems to reinforce Notley's own complication with the lyric 'I,' to which Robbins elucidates in light of postmodern witness, "...it becomes very difficult for readers of such a poetry to stand back from either the suffering presence of a poet or the disasters confronted in the writing" (88). What can be read as an abstract self-portrait as a visual painting is also indicative of a personal suffering that is also necessarily political insofar as Cole subtly invokes a gender politics in his self-portrait verse. Indeed, beyond just a fashioning of an embedded pain is Cole's questioning of a gender binary through which the embodied, yet 'bloodless little girl' is found within his speaker, performing a gender politics of child development through which he offers the reader the scepter of being a postmodern and post-confessional witness through a queer questioning of the politics of the child. This gender politics is one of which both genders are found and embodied within his speaker's, crafting an optimistic schema that at once turns pessimistic when he is lost in the 'wreckage.'

Visuality and gender troubling is a thematic that Cole is continually attentive to as he further hones and refines the self-portrait. He continues this project of self-portraits into *Middle Earth Poems*, through which the introductory poem of the collection is a self-portrait. Cole's "Self-Portrait in a Gold Kimono" intensifies the project of his post-confessional work through hewing even closer to the confessional form insofar as he predicates the verse further upon the lyric 'I' and the lyric self. The introductory 8 lines indeed inscribe the speaker into life existence, in which Cole writes:

Born, I was born.

Tears represent how much my mother loves me,

shivering and steaming like a horse in rain.

My heart as innocent as Buddha's,

my name a Parisian bandleader's,

I am trying to stand.

Father is holding me and blowing in my ear,

Like a glassblower on a flame (1-8).

This self-portrait hews even closer to a more 'traditional' confessional form, insofar as Cole charts a revisionist frame of thinking in regards to inscribing the moment of his birth as a surreal, queer moment. The very event at hand resists the inscription of an image-esque poetics, but Cole is attentive to the tropes of confession through which the 'tears' that are 'shivering and streaming' function as the confession of the intimate, emotive affect of conception. However, much like the previous self-portrait, Cole's language relishes within poetic doubt, difficulty, and evasiveness. As soon as Cole engages in a confessional moment, his verse then mediates a post-confessional space through which Cole inscribes his identity and existence through a clipped verse that deliberately engages intertextually with genre and also simultaneously resists it. The inscribing of confessional image is subdued through Cole's immediate turn towards the marker of identity that exists in a quandary of truth and 'untruth' which invokes a deliberate inbetweenness that is political and post-confessional.

The identity that exists in this poem is hewed to a truth that is inscribed through 'untruth,' that is to say, Cole invites the reader to doubt the autobiographical 'truth' that he offers through troubling gender. Indeed, Cole fashions himself in a kimono even just from a title, foregrounding *Middle Earth Poems* as a discordant exercise in troubling the notion of not just his identity as a French-Armenian immigrant of Japan, but also a complex meditation on the intersection between

gender, personal identity, and the political implications of the complex notions of nationhood that Cole engages with. Having a ‘heart as innocent as Buddha’s’ is a salient declaration of his roots as a Japanese subject, but his nominal ancestry is a ‘Parisian bandleader’s,’ to which the nominative ‘Henri’ is indeed indicative of French ancestry. Cole begins not only the self-portrait, but a meditation on nationhood through offering us the difficulty of his condition. His confession, and in particular his post-confessional moment, is rooted within the political realms concerned precisely with his national subjectivity and his gender identity. He inscribes and articulates his self-portrait through postulating himself as an assumed male speaker donning traditional Japanese clothing, a ‘kimono,’ yet the text articulates a deliberately vague male subjectivity through which Cole even takes to task the necessity of inscribing gender. Such a queer move is itself a post-confessional juncture. To develop further his potential confessional statement, the intersections of the personal (through the mother), nationhood, and queer subjectivity are necessary to articulate his move towards queer confession and post-confession.

To elucidate and further give these self-portraits a further theoretical backing, looking at another scholar’s definition of a post-confession is necessary. Marta Ferguson’s work in defining post-confession concerns entirely different poets (some of which include Denise Duhamel and Timothy Liu) that have their literary genealogies traced to the confessional poets of the 1950s, to which Cole himself operates in a similar space. She defines post-confession as such:

They balance autobiographical material against a skepticism about the nature and limits of the self. Most of them aren’t ‘confessional’ according to any current understanding of the term; nor are they generally experimental enough to be classified wholesale as postmodern. They have in common the self as subject. These poets wrestle with the self in both its postmodern, culturally

overdetermined incarnation and its romantic, inherently soulful manifestation (173).

Ferguson offers us a definition of post-confession as a poet-scholar who hews closer more towards the craft of poetics than from a purely scholarly perspective. Her identification of the ‘skepticism about the nature and limits of the self’ is a salient point that buttresses the theoretical and historical work that Robbins reaches towards; and is also a suitable starting point to which to ground Cole’s ‘self-portraits’ to which he plays with the boundaries and tensions of the ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ self that he necessarily confesses to through which the poetic voice is always grounded in constant skepticism. However, Ferguson’s definition becomes problematic insofar as it does not account for the slippage and relative (perhaps deliberate) inchoateness of post-confession. Indeed, the trappings of Ferguson’s denotative motion of post-confession is that the very nature of post-confession itself must necessarily be unable to be identified. As a poetic genre, its status as a ‘post’ is the space of new poetic possibility, through which instead, post-confession should engender poetic experimentation amongst its practitioners. The tension between literary genealogy and present practice is precisely what makes post-confession a postmodern ‘genre.’ It is through the dual slippage of genre and grappling with the self does post-confession find articulation, most especially Cole’s confessional and post-confessional moment.

Slippage of the self and the intersection of political concerns with nationhood are configured heavily through Cole’s ‘Self-portraits,’ but the project of configuring the confessional model to Cole’s poetics cannot find its proper conclusion without first taking stock of contemporaries who practice similarly post-confessional work. Jeffrey Grey’s salient article on Frank Bidart’s (a contemporary poet who shares similar poetic concerns with Henri Cole) notion of the post-confessional, through which Grey does not offer us an explicit definition of post-

confession. Instead, the notion of it as a genre is precisely steeped in a complex intertextuality, or as Grey would term it, a ‘multitextuality.’ Speaking within the context of Bidart’s poetics, Grey writes:

Bidart rejects the idea of poem as artifact, which has persisted through modernism, replacing it with the idea of poem as process. This substitution in itself is not novel—one often senses poems as a working out or playing out of restless energies. It is, in addition, Bidart’s multitextuality—a point I will take up later—and his rejection of poetic language that place his poetry at this point of the twentieth century and at no other. The issue of language becomes an issue of *thought* (718).

Grey’s critical inquiry into Bidart’s rejection of ‘poem as artifact’ is critical as that is precisely the post-confessional modality that Cole also operates upon. Indeed, multitextuality could be the necessary terminology to which to begin to take stock in beginning to intersect the confessional model between the omnipresent maternal and his self-portraits. As Cole himself is a poet that straddles both the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the language of *thought* must be expanded outward into the very process of thought and the slippage of confessional truth. The threads of poetic process reverberates throughout Cole’s poetics through the struggle of grappling with maternal loss to the blurring of gender and nationhood in his self-portraits. Indeed, a multitextual approach brings a valence to begin to configure how Cole’s confessional moments are queer and ‘post.’ The precise approach that Cole takes in regards to a multitextualism to confession is a dual attentiveness to confessionalism’s ‘affective’ and image-esque verse, but deliberately buttresses and ‘clips’ that verse with “thought, abstraction, discussion” (718) that carry similar resonances with Bidart’s poetry. The very ‘feeling’ of Cole’s confessional moment is constantly interrogated

through the constant doubt of the self, of which even that constructed 'self' is in constant flux to which even verse may falter in poetic process.

Configuring a confessional modality to Cole's verse while remaining attentive to his distrust of the term proves a difficult process in which I myself must be careful to balance the poet's aversion while at the same time, acknowledging his literary genealogy. Regardless, such difficult proves productive in underpinning new potentialities for confessional poetics in the present moment; to which its continued survivance in our current literary moment potentially lies in the post-confessional. Cole straddles the line between confession and post-confession, through which he certainly has in mind the tropes of feeling and picture-esque image in his verse; but through which the modality of deliberate slippage and the unknowns of post-confessional possibility reverberate through his most confessional moments. A straddling of genres is precisely that multitextual approach Jeffrey Grey argues for Bidart; but there is a queer function that resonates within Cole's troubling and blurring of genre. At stake is the common thematic of troubling the notion of 'truth,' which resonate strongly within the grappling of the maternal omnipresent and his self-portraits. Continuing our project of staking the model of the queer confessional, identifying Cole's mother-eroticism and the intersection of gender and nationhood are the foundations to which Cole queers poetic practice. The foundations of what Cole's confessional moments are present in text; but his mode of confession is queer within the theoretical frameworks that Peter Nickowitz and Amy Robbins hew towards. Thus, this paper now turns towards an intimate look at precisely how Cole's verse is a queer project. In doing so, the synthesis and building of a queer confessional model looms closer to an imperfect, yet prototypal completion.

## BETWEEN ABSTRACTION AND CONFESSION

### *Queer Confession in Practice*

“If living in someone else’s dream / makes us soft, then I am so, / spilling out from lungs / like green phlegm of spring” – Henri Cole, *A Half-Life*

What does queer confession look like in articulated poetic practice? The earlier two sections of this paper offer us examples of a prototypal model through the axioms of mother-eroticism and self-portraits. However, what is at stake in considering Cole’s positionality as a queer American poet lies at the crux of how his queerness informs his drawing of genre and tradition. In his poetic function, Cole is necessarily ‘doing’ and performing an intertextual poetics due to his multivalent approach to his literary genealogy. I identify a resonance with James Merrill (a queer post-modernist poet to which Cole finds inspiration) that Robert K. Martin, in explicating a ‘contemporary’ (read: late 20<sup>th</sup> century) archive of homosexual American poetics, to which he writes of Merrill’s early work “always assumed and implied his homosexuality but did not state it. It was taken for granted that those who knew would know. The sense of shared readership was created by a body of taste rather than by any presumed sexual preference” (202). Martin’s forward-looking perspective with queer contemporary poetics parlays a useful lens to which to read Cole’s poetics. Much like Merrill, Cole’s queer poetics engage in a coded discourse to which both his homosexuality and his queerness remain a salient lens to which to unpack the often complex queer modalities that Cole works upon. However, the revelation and knowledge of queerness is often left in deliberate ambiguity. Indeed, perhaps Cole takes the ambiguity of his queer expression to the farther step of purposeful poetic chaos. The notion of queer confession and queer confessional is at stake in identifying the root of Cole’s queerness; through which I argue it is precisely in identifying that state of in-betweenness in

Cole's coded discourse is how we further construct the queer confessional into practice. As a form of literary post-confession, queer confession is also necessarily engaging in a modality of poetics to which its truths are already rendered unstable. Queer confession's in-betweenness is a mode of queer slippage through which queer confession is not only 'between' the notion of abstract truth and literary confession; queer confession constantly slips and activates both modalities at once, refusing the notion of a 'clear' truth and a singular subjectivity.

A critical juncture in analyzing Cole's queer confession in practice is to unpack the queer humor of his verse. The introduction to this paper began to touch lightly on how focusing on Cole's humor is a way to articulate the poetics of difficulty that Cole undertakes; but I take this notion a step further. Cole's humor is key to ensuring that this paper does not engage in a queer hysteria to which a queer existence is necessarily filled with a constancy of darkness but perhaps more critically, queer humor is precisely the kind of conduit that articulates the slippage of queer confession. Cole's "Social Graces," an early poem from *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*, provides us with a foray into a queer humor of self-effacement and the difficulty of family life:

I make no sharp reply, sinking deeper  
into myself and the staggering precision  
of FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS (each child born  
into a phalanx of lives-to-be  
continuing the family tree!), all the pride  
of parents in sons rushing over to me,  
the First Communion and Graduations (55).

Even in such an early example in a collection published in 1989, Cole prototypes the notion of queer confession in this poem. Indeed, it can be argued that he creates and breaks the model of

the queer confessional in this poem, in which the template offered in “Social Graces” is necessarily cannibalized into newer, more contemporary form that is seen in later collections. At stake in the queer hilarity of the moment is how Cole utilizes the earlier proposed framework of a ‘framed disorder’ of Apollonian terseness with the Dionysian language providing the outlet for hilarity. The poem, as a text in isolation, is one that appears to read as ordered verse to which Cole’s embodied actions appear ordered. He ‘makes no sharp reply’ that digs ‘deeper,’ a moment of embedded sexual embodiment through which the Apollonian terseness leaves the queer humor of careful language assembly that deliberately emblemizes sexual deepening as an entrance and receding into the inward. However, queer humor immediately becomes apparent as ‘FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS,’ presented to the reader in all-capital letters, is emblematic of the moment of queer confession that slips through humor. What is being confessed is deeply embedded and clouded in the notion of ‘FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS,’ which Cole picks up throughout the quoted lines in the context of a family communion that is not presented as the poet’s. There is an autobiographical bent, especially as Cole remarks as parental figures that are ‘rushing over’ to him in markers of critical life events of ‘First Communion’ and ‘Graduations.’

However, what is more critical to queer confession and to the poem’s humor is located in the parentheses. Cole establishes that there is an autobiographical bent through the notion of the continuation of the ‘family tree,’ through which the ‘lives-to-be’ (children) that are ‘born into phalanxes’ crafts a surreal image of the creation of the family. Cole’s poetic speaker seems to imply that something as heteronormative as a child’s birth is born into an objective subjectivity. Indeed, even being born into the box of the phalanx is a moment that is both queer yet normative; one in which the image being presented is the queer confession of being within a

restrictive family. However, queer confession emblemizes that confessional moment, and summarily, Cole breaks the model through a deliberate lack of clarity.

An important critical lens to reading this moment of queer humor and queer confession points us towards the direction of David Bergman's study on post-Cold War American Poetics. Particularly, his chapter on the notion of a queer directness proves to be a fascinating intervention. The notion of queer directness seems to contradict and even unravel what my model of queer confession represents; through which Bergman could well resist the notion of slippage. However, what Bergman proposes is not necessarily an aversion to queer slippage. It is within slippage, especially in his invocation of Emily Dickinson's most famous quote, through which queer confession is also itself a rhetorical move towards directness. I quote from the ending of his chapter on queer directness:

Queer directness forces readers to overcome obstacles; straight directness is designed to allow readers to evade such obstacles painlessly. It takes on all the effort to be plain; queer directness makes its readers squirm under its plainness. One is the language of "focus groups;" the other is the insistence of the blessed crank (127)

How does a queer directness then configure in our analysis of Cole's "Social Graces" and to a larger point, the notion of queer humor? Bergman's attentiveness to a queer directness' function to 'overcome obstacles' is critical to reading the confessional moments of humor and pain in "Social Graces." I re-invoke the lines surrounding the 'FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS' to which there is a critical importance to reading the 'lives-to-be' as not a moment of indirectness; but instead as Cole's direct invocation of the oppression of familial succession through the veil of indirection. Through Cole's Apollonian terseness, Cole's poetics has the capacity to make

readers ‘squirm under its plainness’ precisely because Cole’s directness can be misread as queer indirectness. However, it is through his terse verse is where Cole’s queer clarity manifests through his queer humor. It is within directness is where Cole’s queer humor is not only at its most surreal; but deconstructs and reconstructs the model of queer confession all at once. Queer directness may seem to imply that a traditionally confessional-esque truth is a necessity; but Bergman’s attentiveness towards the reaction of ‘squirming’ is especially key to his intervention. Queer confession and humor work in this moment precisely because Cole’s queer directness is slippery within its directness. It relishes in deconstructing the traditional notions of Bergman’s terminology of straight directness, or what I term within this paper, the very notion of a clear ‘truth’ that Cole’s poetics resist.

With queer humor as one aspect of queer confession in practice at hand, I turn towards trying to stake out the further implications of the model. Humor is integral to the slippage of queer confession, with Cole’s modality of in-betweenness often oscillating and even crossing from the hilarity of the poetic image to the deeper tragedy embedded within his queer confessions. Indeed, Cole’s moment of humor also tends us towards the direction of futurity. Lee Edelman’s polemic, *No Future*, proves to be an especially useful text when thinking about the implications of the queer confessional model. It pre-supposes a futurity of queer poetic form.

With a focus on undermining the notion of families, Edelman writes of futurity:

That future is nothing but kid stuff, reborn each day to screen out the grave that gapes from within the lifeless letter, luring us into, ensnaring us in, reality’s gossamer web. Those queered by the social order that projects its death drive onto them are no doubt positioned as well to recognize the *irreducibility* of that fantasy

and the cost of construing it as contingent to the logic of social organization as such (30).

The notion of ‘kid stuff,’ especially with Cole’s role as a child within his moments of confession that are deeply steeped in the maternal, is critical in thinking about how Cole emblemizes queer confession as the figure of the child in his poetics. Queer confession, as literary model, is necessarily the surplus and framework towards a model of a queer poetics of futurity; with Cole’s deployment of the Edelmanian critique of heteronormative futurity flowing through queer humor. However, there is a further case of this framework to be further developed in regards to the notion of ‘language assembly,’ a pointed remark that Cole deploys in his interviews as a methodology for poem creation. ‘Language assembly’ is a term that further queers the Apollonian-Dionysian framework and queers it beyond a ‘framed disorder.’ Indeed, language assembly is attentive towards not just the ‘irreducibility’ of the heteronormative fantasy through a queer construction of poetic verse that necessarily disrupts heteronormative poetics, it is also a necessary reconstruction on the model of queer confession.

Thus, how does language assembly manifest in Cole’s verse and reconstruct queer confession and the Edelmanian critique towards a note of a hopeful queer futurity? I identify a moment of language assembly in a poem titled “Jealousy” in *The Visible Man*:

Self-esteem, like herringbone pavement,  
is breaking up in cartfuls.

Where is the comfort of pears on a window ledge?

To be alone is to be a stranger.

I am he.

This is my autopsy. (48)

Cole's moment of language assembly in this queer confession reverberates as the Apollonian terseness that comes from how the language becomes sparse as the poem progresses towards its final lines. Language assembly is a careful attention to words that Cole deploys to present images that cloud a 'truth,' if there is even a truth to be revealed behind the verse. Just from the first two quoted lines, Cole's proposal of language assembly seems to be both careful and chaotic, re-affirming the model of the 'framed disorder.' There is the establishment of 'self-esteem' compared to a 'herringbone pavement.' The image of a herringbone pavement is a visual of a pavement that is orderly in accordance to a herringbone pattern; a visual echo of Cole's own verse. The 'herringbone pavement' is then further sub-divided into a further orderly fashion, broken into 'cartfuls' that render a clear visual image of a herringbone pavement but also simultaneously a chaotic image as well. Thus, Cole enacts a moment of slippage through his queer confession. The sparseness of the language seems to offer the reader a clear pattern of a herringbone image; but it is critical to note that it is housed under the slippery chaos of self-esteem. Thus, 'framed disorder' here is taken a step further in this queer confession. The Apollonian and Dionysian no longer just flow into each other; the Dionysian is deeply embedded within the Apollonian to which their intimate linkage operates as the framework for queer confession.

Picking up on Apollonian terseness and tying together language assembly and queer confession, the final three lines of the poem are especially salient. In terms of form, the poem seems to become far more Apollonian. The lines progressively grow shorter as Cole works towards the 'confessional' moment of the poem, to which he confesses 'I am he.' Setting up that moment is the line where Cole remarks 'to be alone is to be a stranger.' That line itself is a queer construction; in which the language assembly is deceptively simple but complex when one

attempts to dig deeper into the notions of aloneness and strangers. Indeed, the terseness of the connection between a being alone to the disenfranchising experience of being a stranger also recapitulates Bergman's concept of queer directness. Cole's queer directness complicates its meaning through which the words are direct and assembled to be simple; but it is through this assemblage that the phrase becomes slippery. The slippage is continued in Cole's direct moment of queer confession, the simple phrase 'I am he.' These three words, in the context of Cole's verse, raises more questions in its inquiry despite how Cole's speaker engages in a declarative mood. The question of the 'he' is most critical. Is the 'he' of Cole's confession the stranger, is the 'he' the speaker, or is the 'he' Cole himself? The last line, through the invocation of an 'autopsy,' points us towards the direction of the 'he' being Cole or Cole's speaker. However, who is precisely who remains unclear and perhaps the lack of clarity is a deliberate move in Cole's writing. This lack of clarity is necessary to further the queer confessional model; through which the de-stabilization of autobiographical and poetic truth through language assembly is precisely what is at stake.

In thinking about futurity in conjunction with language assembly, "Jealousy" seems to be a counter-point in thinking about a queer poetic futurity. Indeed, Cole's speaker seems to face a future of death that further postulates the necessity of the Edelmanian perspective on the family. However, the key to reading Edelman's theoretical work with Cole's poetics is that slippage. The slippage of queer confession is perhaps already identified in recent scholarship on Cole but not necessarily explicitly named. Peter Nickowitz' *Rhetoric and Sexuality* contains a brief section on Cole's poetics to which his conclusory notes elucidates a proto-queer confessional model, to which he writes "The confluence of desire, self-hatred, and sexuality is constructed without coyness or material explicitness" (149). What Nickowitz defines here is how Cole's poetic

moments are indeed those of slippage through the remarking of their deliberate lack of an image of clarity or even playfulness. The lack of ‘coyness’ or ‘material explicitness’ is a simultaneous queer directness and queer indirectness that Cole deploys all at once. It is through that careful language assembly is how Nickowitz’s conclusion on Cole manifests through his poetics. Indeed, “Jealousy” functions as an emblem of a dual directness and indirectness, through which the sparse moment of the poem are subtle markers of the confluence between ‘desire, self-hatred, and sexuality.’ Desire exists as the ‘comfort of pears,’ through which the speaker yearns for a surrealist image of pears as an unclear anchor in the unclear world. Self-hatred is examined with the proposal of aloneness to the feeling of a stranger, to which Cole’s speaker carefully constructs a simple statement that is at once complex and yet seemingly profoundly simplistic. The sexuality of his verse is more salient when it comes to assessing the entirety of his bibliography. Indeed, the sexual pleasure of his verse is tightly linked to his writing; to which the very idea of language assembly is itself an act of pleasure that provides a titillation to the writer.

However, how do we continue to pick up on the notion of futurity, especially in regards to not just language assembly but to the very notion of queer confession itself? Jose Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia* offers a counter-point to Edelman’s critique of ‘kid stuff,’ to which Munoz offers us the notion of a utopia, to which speaks of it as:

...a critical discourse—which is to say that it does not avert or turn away from the present. Rather, it critiques an autonaturalizing temporality that we might call straight time. Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and

subsidized acts of reproduction...I ultimately want to speak for a notion of queer futurity by turning to Bloch's critical notion of utopia (22).

In this critical discourse, Munoz carries on critical work polemically started by Edelman through the critique of heteronormative time but charts a newer direction to which queer futurity and utopia become linkages to envisioning a future for queer folk that takes into consideration Edelman's concerns. Indeed, the notion of utopia in the framework of queer futurity is salient in unpacking the very function of queer confession. Language assembly is one critical aspect that Cole deploys in queer confession, through which he has in mind Munoz's frameworks of critiquing 'straight time.' Time, as is configured in Cole's verse and certainly within the two poems that have been analyzed in this section thus far, is very much queer. "Social Graces" may not necessarily offer the utopic future that Munoz proposes, but it very much queers time by queering the social order ('FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS') through the Edelmanian paradigm. "Jealousy" is a poem that perhaps straddles the critical work that both Edelman and Munoz engage in. Its moment of language assembly speaks to a pessimism about the future, to which Cole fashions himself in an autopsy as a dead, queer body. However, at the same time, Cole perhaps re-affirms Munoz's work through his implicit critique of straight time. Cole's speaker is a poetic figure that speaks beyond death, declaring his autopsy and rhetorically ending straight reproduction.

With these two axioms of humor and language assembly in mind, we are now left with the implications of a queer confessional model. Many of the texts that have been quoted in this section, both from poetic practice and from critical theoretical texts, have implied but not explicitly picked up on the notion of 'in-betweenness' that queer confession relishes in. Indeed, the in-betweenness is another way of articulating the notion of slippage that constantly flows

throughout Cole's poetics; to which his poetry slips between multiple modalities. His poetry is queer, confessional, Apollonian, Dionysian, futuristic, dystopic, and queer confessional all at once. Queer confession constantly slips between all modalities, refusing binary, refusing a singular textual reading, and asks of its readers to look beyond poetic genre and considering possibilities in the same vein that Munoz asks for a consideration of a queer, futuristic utopia.

A poem that I aim to conclude this paper with is the very poem that is utilized as the larger epigraph. Henri Cole's poem "Blur," from the collection *Touch* is perhaps the most significant emblem in putting queer confession in practice because it is reflective upon the methodologies and feelings of constant in-betweenness that Cole and queer confession aim for. I start by quoting from the first section of "Blur," to which Cole writes:

I was weak and he was like opium to me,  
so present and forceful, I believed I saw myself  
through him, as if in a bucket being drawn  
up a well, cold and brown as tea.  
My horse was wet all that summer.  
I pushed him, he pushed me back – proud, lonely,  
Disappointed – until I rode him. (50)

In reading this moment of queer confession, it is critical to note the ways in which Cole deploys both queer humor and language assembly to craft the initial parts of "Blur." The wordplay is deliberately both direct and indirect, through which words such as 'weak' and 'opium' are cloistered in one line to craft an image of feeling that is both clear and yet abstract. At the crux of this poem is queer, male desire for another man's body, to which Cole's assemblages of words of 'opium,' 'present,' and 'forceful' signal to an attentive reader that this is an interaction between

two queer bodies even if there is no body present in the literal words. The presence of the queer body, and perhaps even the moment of queer confession itself, is within the auspices of queer discoursed and lodged in the ‘in-between’ of subtext and literary text. The image of a queer body is further de-stabilized as Cole’s language assembly in this poem seems more hewed to a Dionysian chaos, even if its literal construction on the page seems harmlessly Apollonian and orderly. Cole’s ‘self’ as spoken by his speaker is ‘drawn’ through the subject of desire and is compared to an image of ‘tea,’ again emblematic of the surrealist moments and images that Cole often deploys and is a juncture point to unpacking the queer humor of this text.

In unpacking queer humor, I invoke John Vincent’s study on the queer lyric as a critical intervention in foregrounding the in-betweenness of Cole’s verse, which is especially critical to reading not just “Blur” but perhaps his entire poetic oeuvre. Vincent critically calls forth Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument on queer reading practices, through which he writes after directly invoking Sedgwick’s *Tendencies*:

While Sedgwick does not suggest that queer readers are precisely readers who don’t look things up, she does offer a powerful account of why queer readers might not read like George Steiner’s fantasized reader. This “perverse” reading style, which is insistent about taking pleasure in the disjunct, the places where dominant codes of meaning, identity, identification, or desire are held off by mysteriousness, excessiveness, or obliquity (4).

Now, taking into consideration other queer work and taking on the perspective of Cole as queer writer, I do want to push back against Vincent’s notion of ‘excessiveness’ through focusing on the ‘obliquity’ that is certainly located in Cole’s verse. Returning back to the moments of queer humor in “Blur,” it’s moments of humor are indeed oblique as the images are deliberately left up

to the imagination of either a queer or straight reader to peruse. Queer sexual desire embedded as Cole offers up a surreal image of his 'horse' that 'was wet all summer.' At stake in that one line of queer humor, which is oblique code and queer confession for his male lover, is that stakes a queer directness in its sexual desire by being oblique in its language construction. Indeed, the literal line does not make heteronormative, or straight, 'sense.' However, attentiveness to Cole's queer desire belies a line that is deeply embedded within queer desire through the in-betweenness and obliqueness of being in-between abstraction, confession, and directness. Thus, humor is a conduit for the queer reader to identify the sexual pleasure that is made even more direct when Cole confesses bodily action. However, the body is still not present, even as Cole 'pushed him,' the him 'pushing back,' that leads to the image of having 'rode' the horse. Cole, even as he engages in sexual and bodily terms, embeds his sexual desire through continuing the careful construction of the literal.

At stake in queer confession, beyond just how it is written and articulated in poetic practice, is also queer confession's nexus in desire. "Blur" is a queer confession that is precisely about desire for the male subject, with a key emphasis on coded sexual desire. Garth Greenwell's comparative readings on Cole and Carl Phillips is especially salient to which Greenwell codes desire for both poets as "not merely an experience but a lens through which to understand experience; in their different ways, each seeks in desire something like a metaphysics, however fruitless they may find the search." Cole's queer confession in "Blur" is especially emblematic of Greenwell's identification of desire as seeking experience. The sexual desire for the male body is one axiom to which to read the poem. However, desire as metaphysics precisely fits the concerns for the model of queer confession, to which such a modality is itself a resemblance of a poetic metaphysics in which it deliberately finds its most compelling moments in the in-between.

Indeed, the poetic metaphysics of Cole are rooted in the obliqueness that Vincent identifies with Sedgwick's foray into queer reading practices. Queer desire itself is a necessarily coded discourse, but its obliqueness on the page is at the same time also direct. It is not a form that is excessive coy, cloy, or entrenches itself in excessive mysteriousness. It is a form that, in queer reading and to use an idiomatic phrase, is hidden in plain sight.

It is appropriate as we draw further to our conclusion to invoke the words of the poet himself. In terms of considering the very form of "Blur" itself, it is a longer poem that is subdivided into six sonnets. A strict form on the surface seems almost Apollonian, a poem that ends in an even number with each section being within the traditional 14 line structure that, even taking the physical printed form of the poem, looks orderly. However, Cole envisions the sonnet as a liberatory form. He interrogates initially why the poet would want to write a sonnet, in which he asks "why would the poet want to write in a form like the sonnet, where syllables and stresses are counted, and where the little hurricanes of the heart—fear, wonder, desperation, triumph—must be squeezed into fourteen lines, like a live body of the coffin?" (320). Cole's configuration of this question is interesting when taking queer desire into account, as even the way Cole speaks about the writing and construction of poetics is one that is deeply rooted in the terminology of embodiment and emotion. Cole himself answers his own question through the proposal of the sonnet as a form that is not only just liberating but is itself also a form of crossing. He writes:

I don't think so, because the sonnet crosses boundaries of time, style, religion, race, gender, class, nationality, and ethnic identity. The sonnet can be private or public, erotic or religious, ecstatic or melancholy, elegiac or sweetly praising (320).

At stake in the liberatory form of the sonnet is precisely the freedom and crossing that Cole proposes. Cole himself is a poet of crossings, similarly to the way he identifies the notion of sonnets that crosses temporality, style, and other markers of identity. Coded in that is a queer configuration of the sonnet that is similar to the larger aims of this paper. The notion of queer confession in whatever form that it is written in on the page is that queer confession is a slippage of an in-between modality that exists as a crossing between multiple poetic forms. Just as the sonnet crosses the boundaries of categorical markings that Cole demarcates, queer confession is also a crossing between modalities of direct and coded discourse; being both coded in its language and yet direct in its confessions.

I end this paper through invoking the final lines of Cole's poem, "Blur." The ending of the poem is queer confession at its most lucid and clear, through which Cole capitulates to his desire and writes, "all I am is impulse and longing / Pulled forward by the rope of your arm" (55). In a profound confession of his queer desire, Cole still codes it with the language of a general sexual desire; but he finally recapitulates the presence of the body by being 'pulled forward' by the lover's 'arm.' The lover in Cole's poem has crossed from the literal image of a horse to a body part, an arm. Implied to be human, but perhaps Cole could also be speaking about a generality of desire. Regardless, queer confession does not rest upon trying to identify the clearest image from the verse. Instead, the image is coded, often in flux, in a constant in-betweenness, and perhaps in a Dionysian chaos in which the truth is clouded in a constant metaphysics of doubt. The notion of the queer confessional perhaps even troubles the very notion if there is to be a clear truth to be chased after. Cole is 'pulled forward' by the rope of his lover's arm, to which he is simply an 'impulse' and 'longing' that chases after a desire that refuses definition. This is the queer confessional in practice.

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